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ABSTRACT

"Writing to learn" is the motto of writing across the curriculum (WAC). When students write to learn, they interact with subject matter in a way that makes it their own. WAC individualizes instruction because each student's response to a writing-to-learn assignment will be as different as the student's individual experience. A WAC classroom is an interactive classroom. The undeniable virtue of WAC is that it is a wedge into a reform pedagogy. Writing to learn provides ways for somnolent students and aloof instructors to connect. WAC provides a way to celebrate diversity within the framework of community--to engage students' diverse responses within an academic community which, through student participation, should be always in the making. (RS)

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"Errors and Expectations in Writing Across the Curriculum"
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Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)
March 21, 1991, Boston, Massachusetts

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Bill Cook's call to convention has summoned us to review and prophecy. As we review the history of WAC, we see that the false prophets who predicted that WAC would merely be a fad of the seventies now have to consider that the nineties are here and WAC is a matter of intense interest nationally and internationally. As all the panelists have said, "writing to learn" is the motto of WAC. When students write to learn, they interact with subject matter in a way that makes it their own. From the inside, students respond to ideas outside themselves in anthropology, philosophy, and biology. Necessarily, WAC implies active engagement with intellectual material. WAC necessitates student response.

As a consequence, when instructors across the disciplines assign writing to learn, they are necessarily interacting with the diverse responses of the students in their classrooms. WAC individualizes instruction because each student's response to a writing-to-learn assignment will be as different as the student's individual experience. WAC is in that sense **the pedagogy of inclusion.**

Students who differ in gender, race, class, and ethnic background have a voice in the WAC classroom. Instructors and students learn to listen to diverse responses and to engage with each other on commonly considered intellectual issues. A WAC classroom is an interactive classroom. Students write informal, ungraded responses to material, discuss these responses in peer groups, highlight different views when the small groups reconvene, continue the conversation in double-entry journals, and letters to the instructor. Students prepare themselves through these informal writing assignments to go public, to communicate to new friends and to persuade reluctant strangers to engage with new ideas.

For students who have too rarely been in a setting where writing is an expected part of learning, WAC increases fluency. We have some evidence that writing increases students' abilities in higher order reasoning. But the undeniable virtue of WAC--its major contribution to education, in my opinion--is that WAC is a wedge into a reform pedagogy.

Newsweek Magazine has announced that we are in "the decade of the undergraduate." Institutions of all shapes and sizes are searching for ways to improve college teaching. The image of students sitting passively in large lecture halls has become the talisman of everything we are trying to reform. Writing to learn provides ways for somnolent students and aloof instructors to connect. I believe that discussions of what to teach are bankrupt without concomitant discussions of how to engage students in what we teach.

We can change the canon every five years, but without student engagement, our canon reforms will be like the Biblical sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Conversely, we can teach "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as the only text in freshman composition --as one Queens College reformer is now doing--and engage students with questions of gender, race, and class.

As you have heard, the students at Queens College are the vanguard of an undergraduate population that will bring richly diverse experiences to our colleges and universities in the next decade and the next millennium. We have crucially important choices before us right now. We can watch passively as these students become estranged from the educational enterprise and balkanize themselves within neighborhood boundaries that in the borough of Queens have names like Astoria, Forest Hills, Jamaica, and, of course, Howard Beach. Or we can use what we know about WAC to involve our colleagues, as Janice Peritz and Nancy Comley have done at Queens College, in a reform pedagogy.

The title for this talk, "Errors and Expectations in WAC," evokes Mina Shaughnessy's call in 1978 for WAC as a way into reform. Her Oxford University Press book is worth your review

because it seems prophetic--now more than ever. She did what I hope more of us will do in this decade. She learned to inspire a diverse student body by, first of all, learning from faculty colleagues with diverse scholarly backgrounds like those represented on this panel. Errors and Expectations is still the best work I know that connects work in ESL, sociology, urban studies, and communication to the teaching of composition.

Mina Shaughnessy did her work in New York City, and so do we. All of you who live elsewhere probably believe the press accounts of New York City's disadvantages, and sometimes we do, too. But, as a Queens College colleague in religious studies once observed to me on the E train from Queens to Manhattan, the New York City subway system confronts us everyday with diverse cultural perspectives. As we move through that dark labyrinth, we are involved helplessly in a diverse humanity that is not a community but a jumble. Although we learn paradox in the subway --to stand our ground but at the same time to move with the motion of the car, we want something better for our campuses. WAC provides a way to celebrate diversity within the framework of community--to engage students' diverse responses within an academic community that through student participation should be always in the making. The only way to avoid the jumble of the subway car is to develop a reform pedagogy and that means WAC.